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The War for Yemen

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Abstract

Yemen faces a difficult struggle for unity and sovereignty due to the proxy war waged within its borders between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The current struggle in Yemen reflects important elements of all the conflicts in the region. The Yemeni people have a rich and turbulent history that precedes the existence of modern day Saudi Arabia. The territory has suffered division, experienced richness, and poverty, and shared tribal ties with its neighbors. Today, the people of Yemen are suffering through a humanitarian catastrophe exacerbated by the current conflict. The US cannot sit by and do nothing, but the United States must carefully plan any action toward this wicked problem very carefully. The United States must strengthen its alliances with moderate Muslim nations, and stop the perceived threat of an Iranian controlled “Shia Crescent.” It is in the best interest of the region and the United States to bolster ties with Saudi Arabian, augment moderate Muslim voices, work through Muslim partners for credibility, and stem the current wave of human suffering. Through these actions, the US can stem the perceived spread of Iranian control, and work for stability in Yemen and the region.

The War for Yemen

The current conflict in Yemen is a direct proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia and is a microcosm of the fight for stability in the Middle East. Yemen has a rich and storied history that precedes the existence of modern day Saudi Arabia, and has repeatedly been the focus of invaders, divisions, and sectarian splits. Therefore, human suffering abounds and the people desperately need assistance. Today, it remains a fiercely contested space and breeding ground for extremism. American interests in the region necessitate action, but any action by the United States toward this wicked problem must remain cautious and measured. The United States has strong alliances with moderate Muslim nations to protect. Many of those allies find themselves under attack by radicals who accuse them of religious corruption. The Sunni leaders of these states feel threatened by Iran's aggressive efforts to gain influence through a perceived "Shia Crescent." Therefore, the United States finds itself deeply implicated in struggles over ideology based on the symbols and practices of Islam.¹

An analysis of the history, US interests, past actions, and the current situation in Yemen drives the conclusion that the United States must strengthen its support for Saudi Arabia, given regional perception that the recent Iranian negotiations have weakened US alliances and influence in the region. Actions must also strengthen moderate Muslim voices and nations, work through those allied partners, and work for the primary purpose of supporting human interests and reducing suffering. Through these actions the US can stem the perceived spread of Iranian control, and work for stability in Yemen and the region.

Shia versus Sunni History

To understand the modern struggle in Yemen requires an analysis of the escalation of the Shia versus Sunni antagonism that began with the Iranian revolution under Ayatollah Ruhollah

Mousavi Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini was accepted as the *Marja-e Taqlid* [object of emulation] by a large number of Iranian Shia in 1961, and began to be called “Imam,” which he did not reject, even though the title was previously reserved for only the first twelve descendants of Mohammad through Ali. Khomeini used his influence to fight against the policies of Mohammad Reza Shah, then the leader of Iran, and the Prime minister. In particular, he opposed policies dealing with the US that, in Khomeini’s view violated both the law of Islam and the Iranian Constitution of 1907. Khomeini was forced into exile, in 1964, for his continued criticisms. Khomeini was finally able to return in February of 1979. Within a short time, his followers has consolidated their control over the revolution and marginalized the Prime Minister. Ayatollah Khomeini established theocratic rule over a new Islamic Republic, as his supporters proclaimed him the “Imam” and Supreme Leader, under a revolutionary doctrine called the rule of the highest jurisprudent, over the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the ten years the Imam Khomeini ruled Iran, he changed Shia doctrine from a historically quietist stance with separation of mosque and state, to the submission of the state to the rule of religious leaders.²

Ayatollah Khomeini’s rule had global implications. It drove the Shia Muslim community toward a militant agenda and led to the funding and guiding of proxies like Hezbollah and Hamas, which operate around the world on behalf of Iran.³ This militant agenda has led to five distinct campaigns of aggression by Shia Muslims, all of which serve Iranian state objectives and have been successful. The first of these campaigns rallied support for the Shia aggressive movement and showed the world the new proxy war model that Iran would use into the future. The campaign was from 1981 to 1989, focused on attacking Israel, and gaining legitimacy throughout the Islamic community by attacking from Lebanon via proxies.⁴ At the same time from 1981 to 1992, Khomeini waged a second campaign focused on the elimination of dissenting

voices through assassination or counter coup operations.⁵ During the period from 1984 to 1988 Iran's influence in France grew through Hezbollah, using connections from Khomeini's time in exile there, using force to persuade France to end its military assistance in Lebanon and Iraq. This third campaign demonstrated Iran's hatred for western colonial powers. These efforts generated further support from third-world, formerly colonial states, and demonstrated Iran's anti-colonial credentials.⁶ The fourth campaign again focused on Israeli targets, but took the fight international. From 1992 to 1994, Iranian proxies targeted Jewish sites in Argentina, and in Israel itself, and expressed their hatred for the Israeli state.⁷ From 1996 to the present, the fifth campaign has focused on the United States as the ultimate global hegemon and Israel-supporting power. Iranian operatives and proxies struck the Khobar towers and continue to threaten other vulnerable US forces and sites today.⁸

The rise of Imam Khomeini had implications in the Sunni Muslim world as well: Iranian policies inspired other states to use proxies to promote Salafi views. Sunni Salafism developed under the inspiration of teachers and intellectuals such as Sayyid Qutb, who called upon all Muslims to wage *jihad*, or Holy War, against *jahiliyya*, or against the US and modernity itself and what it represents.⁹ A number of radical movements draw inspiration from the 15th century writer, Muhammad ibn Taymiyyah. He inspired the strict and conservative doctrinal movement known as *Muwahhidun*, sometimes called *Wahhābiyyah* in the West that provides the ideological foundation for the Saudi Government. These individuals, and others who followed them, imitated the tactics of Imam Khomeini by expressing more extreme views, and waging their own distinct campaigns of antagonism. The first of these campaigns included multiple, unsuccessful attempts to oust what they considered “insufficiently Islamic” regimes from 1981 to 1985.¹⁰ Simultaneously from 1981 to 1989, Sunni campaigns waged a proxy war and insurgency against

the Soviet Union in its occupation of Afghanistan. During this period, Saudi Arabia and others pushed for the release of extremist prisoners to fight in Afghanistan against Soviet Union, and a Salafi government took power in Sudan, which led to the eventual formation of Al Qaeda under Osama Bin Laden.¹¹ From 1990 to 1998, a third campaign against Arab regimes, such as the bitter civil war in Algeria, waged by the veterans of the Afghanistan war against “insufficiently Islamic” regimes ultimately failed. These veterans also migrated back to Afghanistan to support the Taliban.¹² The fourth campaign focused on the West. From 1998 until today, Sunni militants have focused on intruders in their lands and conducted operations in UK, Spain, France, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, North Africa, and the United States. Sunni radicals seek a true caliphate, as they see the Iranian claim as apostate.¹³

Despite similarities in the movement to antagonism and extreme approaches during past several decades in both Shia and Sunni modern history, the two sets of campaigns differ in many respects. Sunni aggression can be categorized as a continuous, middle to high intensity movement, with questionable success. Sunni extremists tend to work largely un-coordinated and decentralized from Saudi Arabia directly. Sunni extremist groups tend to focus on businesses, organizations, or regimes that violate Islamic law. Sunni terrorists usually kill any hostages they kidnap rather than bargaining for ransom or political action. Sunni extremists increased the frequency of their attacks outside of combat zones by 400% between 1985 and 2006 and doubled the number of deaths that they inflicted in the same period.¹⁴

In contrast to their Sunni counterparts, Shia extremists operate in groups with highly centralized decisions making and support the political ambitions of the Imam in Iran. As a result, Shia attacks tend to focus on getting out a message and gaining media coverage. Shia militants commonly kidnap journalists and demand ransoms for this reason. Shia do not focus on killing,

but gaining notoriety and fame for their cause. Iran uses its proxy militants to convey the message that an attack on Iran will result in a response from all of their proxies. These groups receive significant aid and support from the Iranian State.¹⁵

The US policies against terrorism have changed to focus on Sunni terrorism, in contrast to an earlier focus on Shia style terrorism. The previous focus on Shia style terrorism derived from the trauma of the 1978 Iranian hostage crisis and the bombing of the Marines in Beirut, all of which were well organized and directly tied to Iran. After successful attacks on the homeland of the US on September 11th 2001, terrorism by Sunni extremists created more fear than previous Iranian successes. The Middle East has become a large battle ground as the Shia have taken advantage of shifts in the US political agenda to expand their territory and capabilities, a campaign in which Yemen has become one more step for expansion.

Yemen's History

In contrast to present conditions, Yemen historically has supported powerful kingdoms and a vibrant civilization, before the Al-Saud family conquered Arabia. According to tribal lore around Sana'a, Shem, the son of Noah, builder of the biblical ark, founded the city.¹⁶ The recorded history of Yemen covers over 3,000 years, as reflected in extensive, well-developed arts and architecture in the country today. Several civilizations ruled the area from 1000 BCE and prospered due to the spice trade. This region served as a route from India, and provided Egypt, Greece, and Rome with aromatics like myrrh and frankincense. In addition to the spice trade, Yemen thrived through irrigation and agriculture. An ingenious dam, built at Ma'rib around 800 BCE provided irrigation for Yemeni farmland for over 1000 years, and still has inscriptions of its existence.

The Romans called this area Arabia Felix, which means "Happy Arabia," due to the prominence and prosperity of ancient Yemen.¹⁷ The Romans took over Egypt and Yemen around 100 BCE and the Red Sea became the primary trade route to the East. The new sea route took the focus off the main land routes through Yemen, and this started the process of gradual decline. The Persians later conquered the area and then, with the beginning of Islam in Mecca and Medina, many Yemeni people joined Islam. Yemenis played a prominent role as soldiers of Islam who spread the faith outside of Arabia. During the 8th century, Yemen fell under the control of the Umayyads ruling from Damascus, and then passed under the control of the Abbasids ruling from Baghdad.¹⁸ In the 11th century, a Shia group that follows five generations of the descendants of Ali, known as the Zaydi, established in the north of the area a Kingdom they called the Imamate. In contrast, a group known as the Rasulids, followers of Shafi'i Islam, one of the four schools of legal interpretation in Sunni Islam, ruled the South, starting in the 13th century from Aden. The Portuguese took over the region in the early 16th century and controlled the Red Sea routes between Egypt and India. Later the Egyptians and then the Ottoman Empire conquered the majority of the country. Ultimately, forces loyal to the Zaydi Imamate expelled the Ottomans and united the country.¹⁹ However, in 1839, the British seized Aden and the Ottomans retook North Yemen in 1849, thereby dividing the country. The divide continued into the 20th century and borders solidified between North and South Yemen.²⁰

Following World War I, the British defeated the Ottoman Empire and the Zaydi imamate gained its independence from Ottoman control. The Zaydi ruled Yemen for the next 44 years, and eventually created a monarchy in the North.²¹ South Yemen remained a part of the British Empire until the mid-1960s, when the Yemeni people fought for and gained independence. From the Zaydi monarchy, many key events formed the Yemen that exists today. The Free Yemeni

Movement was born in the 1940s. A revolution in 1948 and 1955 coup failed, but a 1962 revolution succeeded. A group of nationalist officers established the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), and started an ongoing civil war. Fighting continued with Saudi Arabia backing royalists and Egypt supporting the nationalist republican side. In 1974, Colonel Ibrahim al Hamdi staged a bloodless coup, and took control of the government. However, he died violently in 1978 when President Ali Abdullah Saleh took power as President. The Soviet Union exerted strong influence in Southern Yemen, opposed by the Sunni majority in the South. The US also actively opposed the spread of communism in the state and pushed for unification, which only occurred in 1990 after the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union.²² A Southern militant movement opposed unification, but the national army crushed this movement in 1994. In 2000, Saudi Arabia and Yemen formalized a delimitation of their border, and strengthened ties as Sunni majority states.²³

Shia Crescent – Rhetoric or Reality

The United States actions in Iraq, which turned the country over to the Shia majority, garnered comments from King Abdullah II of Jordan warning that the US focus on Sunni extremism versus Shia extremism would lead to what he termed as the “Shia crescent,” meaning an area surrounding Saudi Arabia controlled by Iranian influence. Critics called King Abdullah’s “alarmist,” however, a number of factors give credence to the Sunni fear that the prediction is becoming reality. As various states have fallen into civil war, the void in governance opens opportunities for Sunni and Shia extremists. Iraq, Syria, and others who were once Sunni controlled, but had significant Shia populations are now experiencing Shia, and thus indirectly Iranian control.²⁴

Although in each of the contested areas the opposing forces fight for local interests, an impartial observer cannot deny several crucial facts: 1) Iran does support proxy forces holding a variety of religious values; Sunni Hamas, Zaydi Houthis in Yemen, Shia Hezbollah and Alawites in Syria. 2) Iran openly boasts of its control over Arab capital cities. 3) Iran makes protective demands for better treatment of Shias in other states, as seen in the attacks on the Saudi Embassy after the execution of al Nimr. 4) Saudi Arabia perceives Iranian activities as motivated by sectarian values as well as Persian interests. Critics and proponents alike can agree on the facts that Saudi Arabia perceives that Iran is surrounding them, thus it is, at a minimum, a perceived reality.

The Fight for Yemen (The Proxy War)

Yemen has become an active battleground in the current Saudi-Iran conflict, and has a haunting history as a domain contested in a previous proxy war. Since the Iran–Iraq war, Iran has chosen to work through proxies to meet its political ambitions. Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite militias, Hamas, and the Alawite government of Syria all have clear ties to Iran. They serve as proxies for the Iranian military to create a political reality of a Shia Crescent. Iran now supports the Houthi rebels as part of this proxy war against Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has a history of using the Houthis as proxies against Egypt in Yemen, during the 1962-1970 Yemeni Civil War. However, Saudi support for the Shiite Zaydi sect through the 1960s, in the name of supporting monarchy, has now come back to haunt Saudi Arabia. During the Egyptian incursion into Yemen in the 60s, Yemen proved a very difficult battlefield for the Egyptian forces.²⁵ Egypt eventually poured around 70,000 troops into Yemen, but with Saudi backing, the local tribesmen repelled the force. Although the tribesmen followed the Zaydi Imam, Saudi Arabia allied with tribes loyal to King al-Badr to maintain his rule over a republican separatist movement.²⁶ Ironically, the same

tribesmen to whom they once provided money and arms to as part of royalist militias, now form the core of the Houthi rebellion that they desperately seek to suppress.²⁷

Who are the Houthi

The Houthi follow a branch of Shia Islam called Zaidism. Zaydis led the imamate in North Yemen for almost 1000 years until 1962, and currently make up approximately one-third of the Yemini population. Their name comes from Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, who led the initial rebellion in 2004 to create greater autonomy for Zaydi believers, against what they termed encroachment by Sunni Islamists.²⁸ The group's namesake died at the hands of his enemies in 2004, but his family carried on the rebellion until the 2010 ceasefire with Saleh. The ceasefire did not last long, as the Houthi protested in 2011 for the ousting of Saleh, in which his Vice President, Hadi, took control.²⁹

The Current Fight

The current conflict has roots in both Yemen's history and the Sunni-Shia conflict. However, it has become a bloody, multi-faceted war. The fighting continues between the forces that are loyal to the current President, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, versus the Zaydi Shia tribes called the Houthi. The latter claim to fight against Sunni oppression, and they received support from former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who himself is Sunni. However, the conflict is not as simple as south versus north. The Shia Houthi who come predominately from the Northwest, are fighting the new Sunni-led government, who have the majority of support from the Southeast. A better look at the complexity of the situation requires examining the major actors. The prior Yemeni security forces suffered from divided loyalties. Some joined the Popular Resistance Committees and local tribesman in the predominantly Sunni south, while others have allied with the Houthi and Saleh, who maintained some control over the Yemeni Army even after leaving

the presidency.³⁰ These are the same Houthi who formerly fought against Saleh, but who now receive support from him despite religious differences.³¹ Adding more complexity to the conflict, al-Qaeda (AQ) in the Arabian Peninsula conducts operations against both Hadi and the Houthi.³²

The division of the Yemeni territory divided tribes, which crossed the new borders into Saudi Arabia, and Southern Yemen. Internally, Yemen has a rich tribal history, and because of the current conflict against the Houthi, many Sunni tribes have allied with AQ, while still others see them as brothers in arms against the Houthi. In response to the tribes' call to war, thousands of Sunni fighters united behind Ziyad Al Majdali, a respected Sunni tribal leader.³³ Hadi has fled the Yemeni capital of Sanaa, which fell to the Houthi, and formed a new capital and government with its capital in Aden. The "Revolutionary Committee" organized by the Houthi and supported by Saleh rules the north.³⁴ Hadi, facing a multi-front opposition from AQ and the Houthi tribesmen, requested assistance from the Gulf Arab States and received assistance in the form of air strikes and funding from Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and, of course, Saudi Arabia. That coalition of supporters is growing.³⁵ While support is building, human suffering also rises.

The already desperate struggle for resources exacerbates the suffering from the war. Johannes Van Der Klaauw, UN Humanitarian Coordinator, described the situation as a "humanitarian catastrophe."³⁶ Prior to the March 2015 escalation of violence, the UN recorded that nearly half of the population was living below the poverty line, and two-thirds were unemployed. Resources were scarce before, and now they are not available at all and the population is dying from both bombs and lack of resources.³⁷ As of 16 October 2015, the numbers included over 500 children, and over 61% of the population needed some form of humanitarian assistance.³⁸ According to UN estimates on 12 November 2015, at least 5,878 people have died, and 27,867 others wounded since March of 2015, when the Houthi and Hadi

escalated the violence. As of 18 November 2015, the UN had verified 8,875 reports of human rights violations, which averages to 43 a day.³⁹ The addition of military action by the Gulf States has raised the destructive level of the conflict with great damage to the Yemeni infrastructure and availability of life-sustaining resources. The UN estimated that more than 21 million people are without life-sustaining resources and basic services due to Saudi-coalition led air strikes.⁴⁰

The conflict has simply made a bad situation worse. Yemen has had decades of instability, poor governance, and widespread poverty. Peter Maurer of the Red Cross stated, "Yemen after five months looks like Syria after five years." The war involves 21 of the 22 Yemeni provinces, and shows no signs of de-escalation. The BBC reports over 2.5 million Yemenis displaced internally, and over 120,000 have fled the country. The BBC also describes 14.4 million Yemenis as "food insecure" and 7.6 million as "severely food insecure" meaning that the scarcity of resources has become critical, and many people will die.⁴¹ The US interests in the region will not allow us just to sit back and watch the catastrophe worsen.

Interests of the United States

Yemen has been a focus of US interest since the days of President Woodrow Wilson, and the US goal has been to champion "democracy," maintain stability, and to counter terrorism in the region.⁴² The United States has many allies in the region and a stable Arabia, serves the US interests. These interests fall into three categories: promoting western values of human rights, sustaining our partnership with our allies, and the belief that war should be avoided if possible. The alternative to a stable Yemen would undermine US objectives of stability within the region. The alternative is a continuous cycle of violence that stems from Iran. Shia rule in Yemen would lead to the repression of the majority, giving Iran greater influence and power, and posing a greater threat to Saudi Arabia. All represent poor alternatives. In order to stay in power, Saleh

and his sons have allied with the Houthi and gone against Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. His actions come at a critical time when the US has undertaken a serious gamble against the wicked problem of strengthening moderate voices in Iran. To undermine the power of the Iranian government the US previously imposed harsh international sanctions. To calm Iranian rhetoric, the United States previously pushed for harsh international sanctions, but the same sanctions strengthened the hand of extremists in the Iranian government, at the expense of moderates. So, the United States has chosen to negotiate with Iran, lessen sanctions in an effort to strengthen moderate voices for regional stability. Allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia find this disconcerting as they worry about a stronger Iran, especially if the gamble does not work and moderate voices cannot prevail. A stronger Iran may lead to more organized terrorist style attacks from Shia groups, and embolden them to move faster in exporting radical ideas. Yemen is one key to stemming the tide, and showing that Iran cannot have everything they want.

United States Reaction

The US faces a new wicked problem in Yemen that will affect its interests in the region. From 2002 until the beginning of 2015, the United States conducted over 100 drone strikes on targets in Yemen. These strikes primarily focused on the elimination of senior AQ members and killed over 500 AQ fighters. In recent years US strike numbers have decreased, but the focus has remained on AQ senior leaders. Early in 2015, drone strikes disrupted the spiritual guidance of AQ in Yemen by killing Ibrahim al-Rubaish.⁴³ Additionally, a drone strike eliminated Nasr al-Ansi, who allegedly had close ties with Osama Bin Laden, and claimed responsibility for the attack in Paris against Charlie Hebdo. On the ground, the US has also pulled forces out of Yemen, and relocated them to neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar in

support of coalition efforts.⁴⁴ These moves reduce direct involvement and the appearance of “interference” from the United States.

The United States must be an advocate for the people of Yemen, to reduce human suffering, to support the minority while enabling the majority to control. US officials must continue to study the issue, and support the people through intermediaries. Throughout this process, it is paramount that the United States lessens human suffering, and maintains the strong alliance with Saudi Arabia. Secondary to these objectives, the US must also reduce the perception it threatens Iran, to enable moderate Iranian leaders to focus on reducing corruption, unemployment and other grievous social ills. To work through this problem, the United States must craft its strategic messaging and deliver it through our allies in a way that will reach the people of Yemen.

To advocate for the people of Yemen, the United States must focus its intelligence capabilities on the humanitarian crisis in the region and provide accurate and impartial information. This information would include precise targeting intelligence that the coalition can use to reduce civilian casualties during the conflict. This action will require some covert redeployment of US intelligence capabilities to work with Saudi Arabia and its allies, but the information provided via these assets will save lives, and reduce human suffering. With a reduction in collateral damage stemming from the coalition air and ground campaign, coalition forces will experience less blowback amongst local populations. This would help avoid a prolonged conflict and occupation of Yemen.⁴⁵

Future United States Actions

To reduce tension and not prolong the conflict in Yemen, the United States must focus on four main efforts all focused on the Islamic basics of justice, bread, and dignity. The United

States must assist in reducing human suffering through stemming the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. This will reduce the overall need for people to lash out against their government and will fulfill basic human needs, thus creating a more stable environment. To reduce suffering, the United States must be seen as a non-interfering partner and supporting agency. Lessons from Iraq and other areas have demonstrated the need to work at the local level, including tribal leaders, tribal mediation techniques, other respected Muslim states, like Oman and Qatar, and pushing for enhancements to local security for the population through the national government, not US military.

In parallel with efforts to alleviate suffering, the US must continue to support justice for the minorities while enabling majority rule in Yemen, and strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia. Supporting the majority in Yemen has a dual effect. It will strengthen the tie with Saudi Arabia, as the majority is Sunni, and it will stem the perception of a Shia Crescent on the Southern border of Arabia and stifle Iranian control of that area. This alliance will stabilize Yemeni control and prevent opportunities for Al Qaeda, the Houthi, and other extremists.

Third, in order to provide additional stability to Yemen, the US should work with Saudi Arabia and other allies to empower moderate Muslim voices inside the region. To strengthen moderate voices, all strategic messaging must highlight how all actions from the United States and allies focus on the basic Islamic tenants of justice, bread, and dignity. The United States must be seen as non-interfering, and as an ally to all, not an invading force. This will strengthen those who call for cooperation and moderation in views, and weaken calls for extreme action against America.

In addition to lessening suffering, fighting for justice for minorities while strengthening majority rule, and empowering moderates, the United States must continue studying Yemen and

the region. The proxy war in Yemen is a microcosm of the overall war against the Sunni and Shia Muslim ideologies. The nuances of this situation offer lessons that will assist our allies and the region in the future. Further analysis of the situation will offer insight for the future, and can assist the coalition in Yemen with vital approaches that can speed recovery and stability. As Sun Tzu taught, we must know the enemy and know ourselves, and that takes constant study.

These approaches allow the US to achieve the stated national objectives while limiting direct involvement in the conflict, not being seen as interfering with or manipulating countries in the region, and achieving the secondary effects of a stronger alliance with Saudi Arabia. If correctly implemented, action through intermediaries, continuous study of the causes of the issue and nuances, and a focus on reducing human suffering through minority support while enabling majority control, will empower the Saudi coalition to have a greater stabilizing effect on Yemen and on the region in the near term.⁴⁶ The *United States National Security Strategy* states: “Moreover, we must recognize that a smart national security strategy does not rely solely on military power. Indeed, in the long-term, our efforts to work with other countries to counter the ideology and root causes of violent extremism will be more important than our capacity to remove terrorists from the battlefield. The challenges we face require strategic patience and persistence.”⁴⁷ As dire as the present situation seems, it also offers opportunities for short term and long term gains, and the prescribed actions will be a part of the overall actions to enable movement toward stability.

In sum, Yemen faces a difficult struggle for unity and sovereignty due to the proxy war waged within its borders between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni people have a rich and turbulent history that precedes the existence of modern day Saudi Arabia. The territory has suffered division, experienced richness and poverty, and shared tribal ties with its neighbors.

Today, the people of Yemen are suffering through a humanitarian catastrophe and need assistance, but the current conflict prevents easy assistance. The US cannot sit by and do nothing, but any action by the United States toward this wicked problem must be carefully planned to not make the situation worse. The United States must strengthen its alliances with moderate Muslim nations, and stop the perceived threat of a Iranian controlled “Shia Crescent.” An analysis of the history, US interests, past actions, and the current situation conveys the necessity to bolster Saudi Arabian ties, augment moderate Muslim voices, work through Muslim partners for credibility, and stem the current wave of human suffering, which breeds extremists and insurgents, and weakens the region. Through these actions, the US can stem the perceived spread of Iranian control, and work for stability in Yemen and use that as lessons for the region.

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Endnotes

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